The American historical romance

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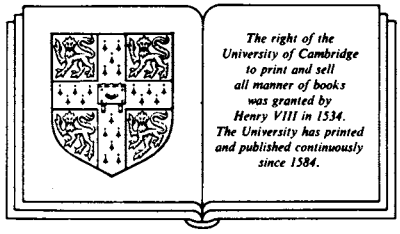

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The American historical romance: a prospectus

For more than a century and a half, the biggest bestsellers, the favorite fictions of succeeding generations of American readers, have been historical romances. No other genre has even come close to the consistent popularity enjoyed by historical romances from *The Spy* in 1821 down to *Gone with the Wind* and *Roots* in recent times. Not to be provincial, we should have to push the date back to 1814 when the Waverley novels began to appear. For it was Sir Walter Scott who created both the genre as we know it and an immense international market for more books like *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe*: more books even than prolific successors like James Fenimore Cooper, Robert Louis Stevenson, Alexandre Dumas, or – sliding further down the aesthetic scale – Zane Grey and Frank Yerby could ever hope to supply. This was a market for "trash" but also for the work of serious popular writers like Victor Hugo and Willa Cather and, on momentous occasions, of highbrow artists like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Boris Pasternak. Writers of all levels of talent, all degrees of artistic and moral seriousness, could find models in the books that Scott and Cooper wrote at the outset of the tradition. For the earliest historical romances varied so widely in artistry and moral substance, in the times and places and peoples represented, that they sometimes appear to have anticipated all later developments of the genre.

Of course this appearance of containing all that followed is a mirage which not only distorts the truth but implies that the genre really has no history. In the course of being adapted to the interests and outlooks of diverse individuals, regions, and periods, the historical romance has inevitably undergone many changes that could not have been prefigured in the works of Scott and Cooper. Still, the history of historical romance as I have read it and wished to write it is long on continuity and short on foreseeable departures from family type. The departures are there and

crucial to this history, but I have made less of them than another critic, with other interests, might have considered essential. I have done so partly because the fictional genre under discussion itself makes more of continuities and reversions to type than is usual among the various forms of the "novel" but partly also because it is the nature of genre studies – their characteristic perceptiveness and obtuseness – to recognize family likenesses at the expense of individual differences. Had I wished to foreground, say, the qualities in *The Age of Innocence* that differentiate it from novels like *The Scarlet Letter* before and *A Lost Lady* after, I would have written an entirely different kind of study.

It may help to forestall misplaced expectations and unnecessary disappointments if I explain more fully what kind of study I have tried to write, and why. Explaining *what* entails defining terms and exposing methodological presuppositions as well as providing a straightforward inventory of "contents" and "coverage." Explaining *why* necessarily involves not only a preliminary look at the nature of the terrain to be explored but also some attention to the achievements of those who have been there before me. My procedure in the rest of this prospectus will be to comment, in three sections, on the premises and commitments implied in the three main words of my title, becoming progressively less "introductory" until, in my discussion of "Romance," I enter upon the main business of the book.

In calling this chapter a "prospectus," I am invoking the precedent of certain historical romancers who begin, interrupt, or close their literary–historical narratives with a "philosophical" overview, a "distant prospect," of their subject. Like the eighteenth-century poets and *philosophes* who are their models, they think of themselves as observers standing outside and above the contingencies of class self-interest, religious and racial bigotry, partial knowledge, and personal passion which blind the actors in history to its broad patterns and long-term trends. In practice, of course, these attempts to detach history-as-observed from history-as-experienced are never wholly successful and are sometimes profoundly self-deceived. But they are emblematic of an aspiration that deserves our respect. The word "prospectus" also has less recondite and elevated meanings which I cannot entirely disown. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, it is "a statement outlining the main features of a new work or business enterprise, or the attractions of an established institution such as a college, hotel, etc." It is, in short, an evergreen American genre, as up-to-date as a tax shelter brochure and as venerable as Captain John Smith's glowing tract for potential settlers, *A Description of New England* (1616).

AMERICAN

The author whose theory, fictional strategies, and "background" I examine most fully in this study of the American historical romance is a Scotsman who never set foot in the New World. Indeed, I might have subtitled it "The Waverley Tradition in American Fiction." For Scott's example, as it variously affected our classic nineteenth-century historical fictionalists and their chief twentieth-century continuators, is the most obvious thread running through all the chapters and binding them together. Moreover, my interest in Scott's own writings goes deeper than might be expected or even desired from a book called *The American Historical Romance* and results in readings of particular Scott novels and, more importantly, in a general approach to the genre which I hope students of British fiction will find useful. However, the book is addressed chiefly to students of American fiction, and my excuse to them for devoting so much sympathetic attention to this foreign romancer is that Cooper, Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and millions of other nineteenth-century American readers did too. Without a quality of attention that matched theirs, I could not have written a study of Scott's impact on American historical fiction which came at all close to having the interpretive depth and historical range that the subject would seem to demand and deserve.

Tracing a generic tradition from its origins in eighteenth-century Europe through its domestication and early flowering in America down to its culmination in the masterpieces of Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and William Faulkner – this is the kind of undertaking which if it is to be accomplished at all obliges one *not* to pursue other ventures, especially other people's ventures, along the way. Thus, although I pay close attention to the regional aspect of historical romance and devote an entire chapter to the fate of the genre in the American South, I may hope to supplement but not to match the richly informed account of Southern contexts in C. Hugh Holman's *The Immoderate Past: The Southern Writer and History*. Again, greatly though I admire David Levin's studies of the American romantic historians and of the interrelationships between the various subgenres of American historical literature, I can give these important subjects but a passing glance. For related reasons, I resist all temptations to repeat Harry Henderson's attempt to pin down (with, so it seems to me, inevitably procrustean results) that protean entity "The Historical Imagination in American Fiction," or to improve upon the half-dozen illuminating pages which Roy Harvey Pearce devotes to this subject in *Historicism Once More*. Neither do I seek to compete with the survey provided by Ernest Leisy's *The American Historical Novel* in which several hundreds of the tens of thousands of novels written by Americans

about their national history are classified according to the period treated, deftly summarized, and judged with good-natured leniency.[1]

Nor, at the other extreme, have I tried to isolate for reverential scrutiny the dozen or so masterpieces of American historical fiction which form its great tradition. However, this book does have a critical agenda and a commitment to the proposition that some of the books like *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe* written by Americans repay the reading much more than others. The novels that I discuss in considerable detail are Cooper's *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* and *Satanstoe*; Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*; Melville's *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd*; Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*; Cather's *My Ántonia*; Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*; Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Great Meadow*; Allen Tate's *The Fathers*; and Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* and *Absalom, Absalom!* For reasons which will become clear later on, I also write about several books which, although by major authors, seem to me deficient on a number of counts: Cooper's *The Prairie*, Melville's *Israel Potter*, and Ellen Glasgow's *The Battle-Ground*. I would not argue with a reader who wished I had written about certain other books by these authors or had included a book by William Gilmore Simms or G. W. Cable or Esther Forbes or Ernest Gaines; but I would maintain that most of the books I do write about are among the best of their kind.

My decision to concentrate almost exclusively on the elite figures in the historical romance tradition was not taken lightly. For it involved sacrifices not only of "coverage" but also of the insights into greater writers to which readings of scores of their lesser contemporaries can often lead. Works of the stature of *Billy Budd* and *Absalom, Absalom!* are rare in any generic tradition and obviously must form but a tiny percentage of the total output of historical romances. An early product of and for the modern age of mass literacy and mass marketing, this genre has had more than its share of specimens deformed from birth by haste, ineptitude, silliness, ignorance, sentimentality, racism, sexism, nativism, chauvinism – the worst traits, that is, of the people who wrote and read them. Some of these traits also appear in a muted or disguised form in the masterpieces of the genre; their authors could not but be infected to some extent with the illusions and anxieties of the society in which they grew up and struggled to survive as artists, family providers, and citizens. Thus although Tate and Faulkner unquestionably operate on a far higher plane of moral and artistic intelligence than Thomas Dixon or Margaret Mitchell, the Southern myths and fetishes that control *The Clansman* and *Gone with the Wind* are not wholly exorcized from *The Fathers* and *Go Down, Moses*.

So it is impossible to draw an absolute line between high and low, clean and unclean, in the historical romance. *Shane* (a good "western")

and *Forever Amber* (a bad "costume" romance) belong to the family as much as *The Scarlet Letter*. Fully to appreciate where a writer like Hawthorne came from and how far he surpassed all rival historical romancers of colonial New England, one must not only know his European literary antecedents but also follow Michael Davitt Bell's lead and sample many books like Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok*, James Kirke Paulding's *The Puritan and His Daughter*, and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's more famous *Hope Leslie*.[2] Indeed, one must go much further than Bell and immerse oneself in Hawthorne's cultural context as completely as its surviving artifacts – not just printed ones – allow. Nothing that belonged to that context can be irrelevant and all things that did, including even things with which Hawthorne could not have come into contact, are grist for the mill of the scholar who knows how to use them.[3]

Yet it is possible as, for simple logistical reasons, it is necessary to make discriminations and practical choices. The premise of this study is that for writers of the highest caliber the single most important part of their cultural context is the work of their intellectual peers. Some things of the first consequence about writers like Hawthorne and Faulkner can be understood *only* by placing them in relation with other major figures in the historical romance tradition, with poets and dramatists they admired, and with social philosophers who directly or indirectly shaped their assumptions about the course of human history. For despite various moral blindspots and defects of taste, Hawthorne and Faulkner were capable – as, for instance, their elder contemporaries Child and Dixon never were – of making the insights of modern historiography their own and thus of appreciating finely how historical circumstances create situations ironic, comic, and tragic by curtailing or liberating the human actors' potential for understanding and action. They were also capable of recognizing and learning from the literary masterworks of their own and the preceding generation in a way that seems to have been beyond the comprehension or ambition of lesser writers. That which they had in common with other great minds may have been no more determinative of the cast or character of their historical fiction than what they shared with the author of *Hobomok* and the *Birth of a Nation* trilogy. But it has made the difference between survival and the oblivion that has overtaken alike the gentle reformer Child and the bellicose white-supremacist Dixon. (Nobody who has reflected seriously on the history of taste or the politics of canon formation can have much faith in the reliability of the survival test, but I believe that it usually works fairly well at the extremes of literary worth and worthlessness.)

Many of the books I have omitted may be considered present inasmuch as the books I do discuss represent their characteristic themes

and values, strengths and weaknesses, and also inasmuch as the interpretive contexts I provide have a relevance that extends beyond the works I am able to treat. *The Battle-Ground*, an early imitative novel by an author clearly destined to do much better work, exemplifies the historical romance in a state of slick sentimental decadence – sabers and magnolias and all. *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, a less polished but far greater book than Glasgow's, shares many characteristics with the dozen other romances of frontier settlement and Indian warfare that Cooper wrote and the many thousands that others have written since. *Israel Potter* illustrates a tendency in historical romance for "ideas" and "adventure" to crowd out character and credibility – and also illustrates the confusion of tone and tenor that can result when a writer of unruly genius tries to pander to the taste of a public with which he is radically out of sympathy.

Although I did not choose to write about any of these works principally because of their representative value, I did place my discussions of them in chapters organized around topics chosen because of their bearing on many or all historical romances. Chapter 2, "The *Waverley*-model and the rise of historical romance," examines the literary origins of the genre in the Romantic Revival of late eighteenth-century Europe and rehearses the reasons why Scott's American contemporaries regarded the earliest historical romances as modern versions of the epic. My example of an early American epic in the Waverley tradition is Cooper's sombre romance of frontier New England, *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*. In chapter 3, "Historical romance and the stadialist model of progress," I explain how the Scottish Enlightenment mentors both of Scott and his imitators around the globe supplied a theory of social development which in effect argued for the universality of the character-types and conflicts at the center of the Waverley novels. I demonstrate how this "Scottish" theory structures Cooper's conception of Leatherstocking, a quintessentially "American" hero if there ever was one. In chapter 4, "The regionalism of historical romance," I reverse the lens to show that historical romances in the tradition of Scott typically have a strong commitment to a particular "patria" and its people, and, as a rule, regionalize the "universal" conflicts characteristic of the genre in actions that pit Yankees against New York Dutch, or deracinated townsfolk against immigrant sodbusters who are paradoxically more Nebraskan (if perhaps not more "American") than themselves. Chapters 5 and 6, on Hawthorne and Melville, show how they brought in ambiguous verdicts on the two things in American history which were supposed to give Americans most patriotic satisfaction and which did attract the most attention from our nineteenth-century historical romancers – the pioneering of the New World wilderness and the War of Independence.

Chapters 7 and 8 bring the story down to recent times. In "The hero and heroine of historical romance" I trace the ways that historical romancers from Scott through Hawthorne to Cather have represented the relationship between fact and fiction in the performance of traditional gender roles. In the Scottish pastoral or American frontier societies depicted by Scott in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, and by Cather in *My Ántonia*, women play active and even heroic roles when their menfolk are unable to perform their traditional parts effectively. In Cather's frontier Nebraska the variety of creative roles available to women goes hand in hand with other kinds of variety – national, ethnic, linguistic – and contrasts boldly with the narrowly "exclusive" society of *The Age of Innocence* in which women revenge their confinements by turning their husbands into invalids. And finally, in "The historical romance of the South," I consider how some of the greatest modern Southern writers have employed the historical romance to assay the compound of heroism and folly, violence and suffering, that went into the pioneering of Kentucky and Mississippi, the materialization of the Cavalier/Plantation myth, the making of civil war, and the modernization of postbellum Southern society.

A last word about the resonance of "American" in my title. Although the most eminent historians of classic American literature have not wholly ignored the European Romantic Revival, they have tended to focus attention on those ideas, obsessions, genres, scenes, plots, and character-types which seem the more distinctively American because they can be traced back to colonial times.[4] Some of the best studies of American literature published since 1970 – notably those by Sacvan Bercovitch, Richard Slotkin, and, more recently, Robert Ferguson – have shown that there is still rich ore in that vein.[5] But since the first historical romance was published by a Scot in 1814 and American fiction and historiography manifestly took a new turn not long after that event, it would be fruitless to try to prove a pedigree extending back to the *Mayflower* or even to the ship that brought Moll Flanders to Virginia. Certainly some American historical romances are set in colonial times by writers whose own family histories may be covertly implicated in the fictional or historical actions, and so we can sometimes enhance our understanding of, say, *The Deerslayer* and *The Scarlet Letter* by rattling the skeletons in the Cooper and Hawthorne family closets. It is likewise true that the typological hermeneutic which Hawthorne and Melville inherited from New England Calvinism lent itself very serviceably in their fictions to an "explanation" of events perfectly normal in romance but unaccountable to modern historiography. One cannot afford to be ignorant of such matters in interpreting our early historical romances. In the main, however, the intellectual and literary-generic sources of the

tradition are to be sought in the Old World or, as in an uncannily revealing mirror, in the writings of the eighteenth-century American who was most in touch with the ideas circulating in contemporary London, Paris, and Edinburgh: Thomas Jefferson. To achieve a precise critical and historical appreciation of Cooper's handling of the flight-captivity-and-pursuit plot in *The Last of the Mohicans*, it is important to know the Indian captivity narratives of early New England and New York, but it is even more important to know *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

HISTORICAL

This study is concerned with both the history *of* historical romance and the history *in* historical romances. How did the genre rise, redomesticate itself in America, and retain an identity while also changing in response to the changing circumstances of American social, political, and intellectual life? What shape did our romancers see American history taking, and what settings did they favor for disclosing the emergence of this shape? Although my purpose here is less to address these questions than to explain how I try to deal with them later on, perhaps it will be helpful briefly to anticipate the tenor of my answers by supplying a second chapter-by-chapter overview, written this time to bring out the "Historical" rather than the "American" dimension.

In a passage to be examined in chapter 2, Coleridge maintained that the secret of Scott's success was his "subject" – the age-old contest between the forces of reaction and progress. Unfortunately, Coleridge pitched his analysis of this subject or major theme at a level of philosophical abstraction so elevated that he lost sight of the ways that the contest had revealed itself in recent history. It was, of course, precisely because of these recent manifestations – above all in the American and French Revolutions and in the worldwide imperialistic conquests by France and Britain – that Scott's subject had moral urgency and interest for the nineteenth-century reading public. In *Waverley* and its successors Scott created a readily adaptable model for the fictional or historiographical portrayal both of revolution (in this case an unsuccessful one by reactionary Catholic Jacobites) and imperialistic conquest (by the British Protestant armies of progress). My second chapter provides an abstract of this model and explains how Scott's understanding of the dynamics of history was influenced not only by the major socio-political events that occurred during his own lifetime but also by the earlier tremors of an international "Romantic" revolution (or revival) in literature. I conclude the chapter by showing how Cooper adapted the *Waverley*-model to American conditions in *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, a frontier romance which counts the human costs of colonization with unusual honesty.

In chapter 3 I contend that the Scottish "philosophical historians," most notably Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, led Scott and Cooper to regard history as a drama in which Providence was identified with and to a large extent replaced by Progress and in which the human actors were so culture-bound, so limited in outlook, that the course of history was inevitably characterized by blind conflicts and actions leading ironically to unintended consequences. This chapter pays special attention to *The Prairie* and the figure of Leatherstocking as the pathfinder and victim of progress. Chapter 4 explores historical romance's translation of the conflict between reaction and progressivism into a conflict between regional loyalties and the federalizing, colonizing drives of British and, later, American imperialism; it looks closely at Irving's and Cooper's portrayals of the Yankee "invasion" of New York. In chapter 5, I discuss Hawthorne's ambivalent view of the forces of progress as represented by the seventeenth-century Puritan colonists of New England and the eighteenth-century patriots who wrested independence from Britain. Chapter 6 shows how Melville's more radical critique of progress led him to see historical development assuming the shape not (as Jefferson would have it) of a line trajected toward perfectibility, nor (as Hawthorne would seem to have it) of an ascending spiral, but rather of an old-fashioned cyclic rise and fall.

My chapter on "The hero and heroine of historical romance" takes its departure from an analysis of how Scott's "wavering" heroes and "strong" heroines – especially in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* – subvert traditional gender stereotypes and yet finally conform to the expectations of a society which rejects revolution but accepts gradual change. Scott's awareness of how gender roles are historically conditioned is further enlarged in the historical romances of Hawthorne, Wharton, and Cather. Finally, in "The historical romance of the South," I re-examine Mark Twain's famous argument:

> Then comes Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back; sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society.[6]

And I go on to show what some of the greatest modern Southern historical romancers have made of the "sham chivalries" with which their region was allegedly infatuated and the "wave of progress" by which Mark Twain himself was, for a time, swept away.

To examine Scott's American legacy in any depth means paying close attention to matters which are of the first importance to Marxist criticism: social revolution, colonialism, and the relationship between literary-generic and socio-economic change. I make a point to do so, and

like all students of historical fiction I am indebted to the greatest Marxist literary critic – Georg Lukács.[7] Most readers of this book will probably know that in *The Historical Novel* Lukács traces the rise of the historical novel from the rise of modern historical consciousness regarded as a product of (or at least as a process tremendously accelerated by) the dramatic social and political changes wrought throughout Europe by the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. Beyond question, the promise or threat of these changes did have a transforming effect, which extended well beyond continental Europe and well after the Bourbon Restoration, on nearly everybody's sense of the security of the *status quo*. As Melville recalls in *Billy Budd*:

> That era appears measurably clear to us who look back at it, and but read of it. But to the grandfathers of us graybeards, the more thoughtful of them, the genius of it presented an aspect like that of Camoens' Spirit of the Cape, an eclipsing menace mysterious and prodigious. Not America was exempt from apprehension. At the height of Napoleon's unexampled conquests, there were Americans who had fought at Bunker Hill who looked forward to the possibility that the Atlantic might prove no barrier against the ultimate schemes of this French portentous upstart from revolutionary chaos.[8]

It was in this atmosphere that Scott (1771–1832) spent the twenty-five years of his adult life which preceded the publication of *Waverley*, and, as I substantiate in chapter 2, there can be no reasonable doubt that his account of modern Scottish history in the Waverley novels is (among other important things) an oblique commentary on the perils of internal revolution and foreign conquest through which Britain had recently passed.

However, warmly though I admire Lukács and some of his followers, I am a Marxist neither in politics nor scholarly methodology, and I believe that he assigns the French Revolution a more generative role in the development of historical consciousness in society and literature than even *that* epochmaking event could have had – at any rate outside continental Europe. He largely ignores the rise of historicist thought in pre-revolutionary Scotland and Germany and exaggerates the gap between the historical novel of Scott and the historical drama of Shakespeare and eighteenth-century Shakespearean imitators. Although these omissions in Lukács's version of the prehistory of the historical novel seem to have few adverse consequences for his study of the major French, Russian, and German practitioners, they limit the usefulness of *The Historical Novel* for anybody who wishes to understand where Scott came from and why he had such an awakening effect outside continental Europe. Indeed, Lukács's commentaries even on Scott are remote from the actual texts of the Waverley novels and occasionally inaccurate. To the reader who is not a Eurocentric Marxist, Lukács's opening chapter

sometimes appears a misty mythic prelude to the wisdoms and chronicles of the chosen people.

Valuable correctives to Lukács are Donald Davie's *The Heyday of Sir Walter Scott*, Avrom Fleishman's *The English Historical Novel*, and Harry Shaw's *The Forms of Historical Fiction*.[9] Davie and Fleishman have a firmer sense of intellectual and literary traditions beyond the European continent, and Davie's work has the great British critical virtue of caring more for particular novels and poems than for "literature," "ideas," or critical system. Fleishman, by contrast, is richly informative about the social and intellectual contexts of British historical fiction but tends often to read it as a mere illustration or precipitate of those contexts. Like Davie, Shaw is a sensitive reader of some of the masterpieces of nineteenth-century British and continental historical fiction, and he has also introduced several useful categories for sorting out the ways that historical novelists employ history.[10] Yet much as I have learned from these three critics, I have not found that they do much more than Lukács to account for the semination and growth of a flourishing American tradition in historical fiction. Believing that "Lukács has provided what is likely to be the definitive *historical* study of historical fiction," Shaw treats his subject "in terms that are primarily synchronic" (pp. 10–11) and in any case, like Fleishman, takes scarcely any notice of American developments. Although Davie has a couple of perceptive chapters on the Leatherstocking novels, he does not undertake the kind of systematic study of the conditions of cultural transmission which is needed to explain why, once it was introduced to them, American fictionalists took to the historical romance like so many swifts to air.

In the course of trying to supply what I found wanting in these excellent books, I have become very conscious of the limits and biases of my own approach. Some of these I have already noticed in connection with my coverage of things "American," and I would like to say something further here about what I do and do not claim to offer in this study of a literary tradition which extends, prehistory and all, over a period of two centuries and cuts across several national literatures. Although I have tried to read widely among the novels and critical studies relevant to my topic, I have inevitably read more deeply in some authors and periods than in others – mainly because these seemed the most relevant, but partly too because to me they were the most consistently engaging. For the same reasons, I have devoted more space here to Scott, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville, and to British and American Romanticism generally, than I do to later developments. That I do does not mean that I have a lower opinion of the twentieth-century authors discussed in chapters 7 and 8 or, for that matter, that these chapters gave me less pleasure to research or trouble to write; quite the

contrary. Neither does the amount of space accorded to individual novels necessarily reflect my sense of their worth: I write at greater length about *The Fathers* than I do about *The Age of Innocence* or *Absalom, Absalom!* not because I think it is the greater work but because it has been comparatively neglected by other commentators and because it lends itself especially well to interpretation in light of the Waverley tradition.

The most important *caveat* is also the most obvious: although this project calls for considerable familiarity with the intellectual and socio-political history of Europe and especially the United States since the early Enlightenment, it is primarily a literary study and I am primarily a literary scholar. To be sure, my findings should be of more than casual interest to students of American social and intellectual history. Although I do not discuss Bancroft, Prescott, or Parkman directly, my account of the beginnings of historical romance does, I believe, usefully supplement David Levin's landmark study of the shape and progress of American romantic history. Moreover, because of their immense popularity, the books I examine have undoubtedly had a profound effect, both individually and as a genre, on the way that Americans of all levels of education and intelligence have conceived of their past, present, and future. Therefore I believe that this book makes a contribution to the history of American ideas about history.

But I do not speak to students of American history as a social or political historian might. I have little or nothing to say, for instance, about the degree to which Cooper's representation of family life on the seventeenth-century New England frontier is or is not confirmed by recent demographic reconstructions. And although I happen to know a good deal about the documentary sources of *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* and might have described Cooper's treatment of them, I concentrate instead on the way that Cooper's own reconstructions of New England frontier family life were guided by the theories of certain Scottish Enlightenment philosophers and the way that this historical romance first published in 1829 is organized around clusters of opposed images, character-types, and values which likewise appear in Goethe's historical drama *Goetz von Berlichingen* a half century earlier and in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* a century later.[11]

In sum, this study belongs to a species of literary-intellectual history which, as I remarked at the beginning of this introduction, is long on continuity and conformity to type and *comparatively* short on the deviant particulars and contextual details which might be at the center of a different kind of historical study. I stress "comparatively" because, although I believe that histories of genres and ideas are important enough to justify the sacrifices necessary to write them, what I value above all as a scholar and teacher of literature are not "the" Waverley novels or "the"